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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the summer Parent Orientation Program at the University of Maryland and an evaluation of the program several months later. The goal of the program was to educate parents in the facilitation of their son's or daughter's transition from high school to college. Another goal was to recognize parents as a vital part of the university community. This recognition was attempted through a response to the needs of the parents. The incongruence in values between the generations shows the need for efforts at improving understanding among children, their parents, and the university. The results showed that parents who attended the Orientation Program generally approved of it, evaluating the program favorably. They continued to regard the Program highly during the school year. From the data it appears that the program was successful, because it made the University more familiar to the parents and because it allayed fears of the parents that their son/daughter would not succeed. (Author/WS)

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AFTER INNOVATION: PERSPECTIVE ON A PARENT ORIENTATION PROGRAM

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Innovation in present student personnel practices and programs has become vital in meeting the changing needs and life styles of those who make up the university community. This report not only discusses a relatively new program for parents who wish to help their son or daughter adjust to university life, but also describes the parents' evaluation of the program several months after their participation.

AFTER INNOVATION: PERSPECTIVE ON
A PARENT ORIENTATION PROGRAM

If parent orientation is still an innovation, it is a somewhat mellowed innovation in that several universities have held these programs in recent years (Butts, 1971). Yet while the initial thrust and excitement of newness may have abated, the on-going practical applications of such programs continue to provide significant opportunities to affect behavior. This paper will describe a summer parent orientation program and an evaluation of the program during the school year several months after the innovation.

In the Parent Orientation Program at the University of Maryland, the explicit goal is to educate parents so they may facilitate their son's or daughter's transition from high school and home to university life. The implicit, equally important goal is to recognize parents as a vital part of the university community and to show this recognition by responding to their needs--especially during the sometimes difficult period of separation from their son or daughter.

Nowhere has separation of student from parent become more noticeable than in the student-parent incongruence of values commonly called "the generation gap." We need only to watch Archie Bunker and Michael, his "meathead" son-in-law, to see it before us. Several researchers, however, have examined more pointedly where the incongruent values lie. Hurst, Munsey and

Penn (1971) report that after one quarter, freshmen move to a more liberal position on religious, political and sexual values while their parents remain unchanged. Braskemp and Flessner (1971) see freshmen differing from their parents in goals for attending college, and Sandell and Rossmann (1971) discuss freshmen who view themselves as less materialistic, religious and rigid in life style than their parents.

While students may describe this time in their lives as experimental, parents are concerned that their children will adopt values which will bring them harm. Bordin, Shaevitz and Lacher (1970) report that generally parents exert more control over students than the students will find at the university, yet parents often expect the university to exert even more control over their son or daughter than they as parents did. Studies by Dua (1966) and Johnson (1969) lend further support to the irony that in a time when the university is abandoning its in loco parentis role, most parents of new students favor it. Such incongruence in values demonstrates the need for efforts at improved understanding among students, their parents, and the university.

The Maryland Program

The Parent Orientation Program was held on 27 days, including several evenings and Saturdays, in late June, July and early August of 1971. One-thousand, nine-hundred and seventy parents (1,970) attended a one-day program, with an average of 70 parents attending per day.

The program had eight events. The first event of the morning was an official welcome by a high University administrator. These brief remarks were followed by a film entitled "Continuum--A day in the life of students at the University of Maryland."

Next, a counselor from the University of Maryland Counseling Center conducted a discussion on "How parents can be most helpful to a college freshman." During this hour and a quarter, the counselor would say a few words about counseling services; then the counselor and several student sponsors would role-play a parent-student encounter over a controversial topic. Topics included the son or daughter's interracial dating or sexual relations, use of marijuana, or participation in a violent campus demonstration. Two scenes were usually portrayed: one in which communication was blocked and arguments occurred and a second in which communication was open and empathic, although agreement was not necessarily the outcome. Following these brief skits, the counselor, student sponsors, and Student Activities staff would facilitate a discussion with the parents about theissues mentioned and parents' related concerns.

A coffee break was well-placed h re because by now parents were actively talking with each other and it was already 11:00 a.m. The fourth event, which followed the coffee break, was a panel discussion covering the University's resources and services. Representatives from the Counseling Center/Reading and Study Skills Lab, Placement Service, Student Activities Department,

Religious Life, University Housing Office, Food Service, Health Service, Financial Aid Office, and Library Facilities gave capsule presentations and answered parents' specific questions.

After an informal lunch with students and staff, parents heard a representative of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs explain what constitutes academic success (i.e., what it takes to stay in school). The seventh presenter was from the Office of Admissions and Registration outlining the University's academic standards (i.e., admission, failing, withdrawing, reinstatements, etc.). The final event of the day allowed parents a small group discussion with a student sponsor. The student sponsors were undergraduates who were especially selected for their ability to relate to others, knowledge of the University, objectivity, and representativeness of the undergraduate student body. During this event, students spoke candidly about their observations and experiences at the University. Parents usually asked questions about what it was "really like" being a student at the University of Maryland.

Evaluation

In the two years that the University has run the Parent Orientation Program, parents have evaluated it favorably. In 1970, almost 95% of attending parents rated the Program highly and urged the continuation of the Program. Evaluations, however, were taken immediately after parents had met in the discussion groups with student sponsors and thus there was some question of a halo effect accounting for the high ratings. Questions about

the longer-range value of events also arose. It was therefore decided that a follow-up study should be conducted to assess the value of the Program to parents at a time when they would be likely to confront problems--actually during the school year.

Of the 27 attendance dates, eight were randomly selected for research purposes. It is important to remember that parents in the sample were attenders only and thus are not fully representative of all parents of freshmen.

The sample was divided into three groups: one which would be surveyed in late October, approximately six weeks into the fall semester; one which would be surveyed in early December, after the Thanksgiving recess; and one which would be surveyed in early January, after the Christmas vacation. These three times were chosen because they appeared to allow time for students to have experienced the campus environment and also to have returned home. In all, 165 parents were sent the letter explaining the survey, the Parent Orientation Program Questionnaire, and a stamped pre-addressed return envelope. With a follow-up contact a week or so after the mailing, 89% of the parents responded with usable data.

The questionnaire consisted of eight items corresponding to the eight events on the Parent Orientation Program. Parents were asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert-like scale ranging from (1) very poor to (5) very good. Parents who did not attend or did not remember an event were asked to mark (0). Next, parents were asked to identify the event which they "<u>now</u>

consider most valuable," and "now consider least valuable." Furthermore, they were asked if they thought the Program should be continued, if they would like additional orientation programs during the school year, and lastly they were asked a free-response question about whether the Parent Orientation Program had made any specific difference to them in their role as parents.

Results

The results showed attending parents clearly approved the Parent Orientation Program. Seven of the eight activities on the program received overall ratings of very good or good, and virtually all responding parents said that the Program was a good idea and should be continued.

The parents surveyed in late October rated the overall organization and conduct of the Parent Orientation Program 4.45 on the five-point scale (Table 1). Almost 90% of those surveyed thought that the Program was very good or good. The activity which parents rated highest in October was the small group discussion with the student sponsors, 4.52 on the five-point scale. Next highest was the panel presentation of University resources with 4.29 and close behind was the discussion of academic standards. The other activities were rated highly, all over 3.00 (fair). When asked what event they considered most valuable now, 31% said the small group discussion with student sponsors, 29% named the panel on University resources and 12% named the discussion on how parents can be most helpful. When asked what

event was least valuable now, 48% left the question blank; 24% named the film "Continuum" (Table 2).

Parents surveyed after Thanksgiving recess responded similarly to those in October. 98% rated the overall Program very good or good, with a mean rating of 4.56 (Table 1). Of the events on the Program, parents once again gave the highest mean rating to the discussion with the student sponsors. The group discussion on how parents can be most helpful was second and the panel of resources third. When asked what event they considered most valuable now, 30% of parents responding in early December said the panel of University resources, 20% named the discussion on how parents could be most helpful, and 18% said the meeting with the student sponsors. Again, parents either left blank (46%) or named the film (32%) as the activity they valued least (Table 2).

Finally, parents surveyed after the Christmas holidays added the final note of consistency to parents' evaluation of the Program. Almost 95% regarded the Program very good or good, rating it 4.47 out of 5.00. The highest rated event was the small group discussion with student sponsors, followed by the panel of resources, the presentation on academic expectations, and the discussion on how parents can be most helpful (Table 1). When asked what event they found most valuable now, 27% of the parents responding in early January named the discussion on how parents can be most helpful. 27% also named the panel of resources and services, and 20% said the discussion with the student sponsors. Once again, most parents either left blank

(36%) or named the film "Continuum" (31%) as the least valuable part of the Program (Table 2).

What emerges from the follow-up study are positive ratings which are consistent across groups. The analysis of variance technique was applied to the ratings in the three groups and the results supported the contention of no significant differences among the parents surveyed in October, December and January. That is, positive ratings were stable over time. Furthermore, over 90% of the parents attending the Parent Orientation Program rated it very good or good during the school year while no part of the Program was rated less than fair. The three events most often rated to be most valuable during the school year were the panel of resources and services, the group discussion on how parents can be most helpful to a college freshman, and the meeting with student sponsors. Most parents declined to name the part of the Program they considered least valuable.

We were also interested in discovering what impact the one-day Program had upon parents' attitudes or behavior in dealing with their student. As expected, the responses ran the gamut (Table 3). One parent wrote to tell me that her daughter had just transferred, to mind my own business, and to quit bothering her. Others wrote that the Program had convinced them to listen more and allow their son or daughter to grow. Among the respondents, several themes emerged. A minority (13%) did not answer the free-response question and 9% said the Program had made no difference in their behavior or attitudes.

13% said they had come to understand the University better while 12% described their lessened apprehensions that their student would be just a number in an impersonal bureaucracy. 9% related their allayed fears regarding riots, drugs, sex and various other fears. 12% responded that the Program influenced them to give their son or daughter more freedom to make decisions, while another 12% said they had come to better understand what their son or daughter would be going through.

Discussion

Parents attending the University of Maryland Parent Orientation Program continued to regard the Program highly during the school year. From the data on what parents considered the most valuable part of that Program, the Program, it appears, was successful because it made a big, impersonal University familiar to parents and because it allayed their main fears that their son or daughter would not succeed; it showed that academic and social success are probable, that there are people and services well-equipped and ready to help, and that all students do not degenerate into dope-fiends, sex maniacs, and rabble-rousers.

Although only one part of the Program was entitled "how parents can be most helpful to a college freshman," certainly the entire Program held this goal. Parents came with specific questions and, especially in the panel presentation, received specific answers. Parents came with apprehensions about University life and particularly through frank discussion with the student sponsors had these fears allayed. Some parents came

with their own circumscribed point of view, and discussions such as the role-played student-parent confrontations helped them to understand what their son or daughter would be going through. In fact, the value of this vicarious exposure to student values may show its effect only over time, since parents responding in January rated the role-played discussion the most valuable part of the Program. Data in Table 2 also reveal that over the three months the percentage of parents rating the role-played discussion as most valuable now increased from 12% (October) to 20% (December) to 27% (January).

Actual behavior change was hard to assess on a self-administered questionnaire. Some parents continued to note lack of emphasis on religious values and the University's minimal enforcement of rules of conduct. Reading these responses reminds us that a one-day program seldom transforms behavior or outlook. Many more parents, however, reported they nagged their student less, gave the student more freedom, or tried to put themselves in his place. These data remind us that we have some effect on parents' behavior and can, in fact, narrow the incongruence of values between students and parents. More generally true, it seems, was the fact that parents became better informed about the University and the freshman experience. As the anecdotal data attest, the better informed parent was more able to help his son or daughter make the transition into University life. In this respect the Program reached its goal.

The remaining question is what further can be done to facilitate transition into the university environment. Retaining

a Parent Orientation Program such as this is one step. This innovative effort was successful in that it informed parents, demonstrated the University's concern for them, and acknowledged that parents' support in the early college years of the student can strengthen the sense of purpose in higher education. Although the majority of parents surveyed were not interested in more orientation programs during the school year (Table 4), other kinds of communication could help. A Parent Orientation newsletter or telephone hot-line as suggested by Forrer (1971) are noteworthy, especially in reaching parents not attending the orientation sessions. Role-playing student-parent conflicts for student orientation or even providing for such interactions in family units during a joint parent-student orientation session could well provide the most supportive bridge between different value systems. Whichever the path, the direction of parent orientation programs promises to be stimulating and relevant to the university community.

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Table 1

Parents' Mean Ratings of Events of the Parent Orientation Program

Event	October Group (N = 42)		December Group (N = 50)		January Group (N = 55)		Overall (N = 147)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean
Overall organization of Program.[a]	4.45	.67	4.56	.54	4.47	.60	4.49
Film "Continuum"	3.74	.64	4.09	1.01	3.92	.79	3.92
Discussion and role-playing: How parents can be most helpful to a college freshman.	4.03	.80	4.32	.77	4.19	.79	4.18
Panel presentation of resources and services.	4.29	.61	4.23	.77	4.23	.60	4.25
Speaker on academic life and expectations.	4.11	.70	4.20	.75	4.17	.56	4.16
Speaker on academic standards.	4.15	.71	4.17	.81	4.21	.64	4.18
Small group discussions with student sponsors.	4.52	.80	4.51	.84	4.44	.78	4.49
Meals and accommodations.	4.11	.80	4.02	.88	3.88	1.08	4.00

[a]Although parents rated this item on the five-point Likert-like scale, it was not a specific event on the Program.

Table 2

Parent Responses to Events Rated "Most Valuable Now" and "Least Valuable Now"

Event	October Group				December Group				January Group				Overall			
	Most Valuable		Least Valuable		Most Valuable		Least Valuable		Most Valuable		Least Valuable		Most Valuable		Least Valuable	
	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank
Film "Continuum"	7	5.5	24	2	4	6.5	32	2	0	8	31	2	3	7	29	2
Discussion & role-playing: How parents can be most helpful to a college freshman.	12	3	14	3	20	2	6	4	27	1.5	9	4	20	3	10	3.5
Panel presentation of resources and services.	29	2	2	6.5	30	1	6	4	27	1.5	18	3	29	1	10	3.5
Speaker on academic expectatins.	10	4	5	4.5	10	5	0	8	7	5.5	2	6	9	5	1	7.5
Speaker on academic standards.	2	7.5	5	4.5	4	6.5	2	6.5	7	5.5	2	6	5	6	3	5.5
Small group discussions with student sponsors.	31	1	2	6.5	18	3	6	4	20	3	2	6	22	2	3	5.5
Other	2	7.5	0	8	1	8	2	6.5	1	7	0	8	1	8	1	7.5
Blank	7	5.5	48	1	14	4	46	1	11	4	36	1	11	4	43	1

Table 3

Parents' Replies to Free-response Question about Effect of Parent Orientation on Their Behavior or Attitudes

Theme of Response	N	Percentage of Parents
Understand better what our son/daughter is going through.	18	12
Give our son/daughter more freedom to make decisions.	18	12
Relieved to a great extent about fears of riots, drugs, sex, etc.	13	9
Now know someone cares--that our student will not be just a number.	18	12
Know the University better.	19	13
The Program made no difference in behavior or attitudes to me as a parent.	13	9
No answer.	19	13
Other, unrelated replies.	29	20
Total	147	100

Table 4

Parent Responses on the Need for Further Orientation Programs

Response	October Group	December Group	January Group
Yes	17 (40%)	20 (40%)	17 (31%)
No	16 (38%)	22 (44%)	29 (53%)
Blank	9 (22%)	8 (16%)	9 (16%)
Total	42	50	55